

nan does not follow this harsh line of logic. But he should be reminded of it.

One does not have to see the Soviet leadership in the fearful, apocalyptic fashion that Kennan's "opponents" do. The Russians are not crouched, ready to rain their missiles down on our cities when they come to believe they have a first-strike capability. They know, and Lenin (a perverse apostle of Clausewitz) knew, that politics is a continuation of war by an admixture of other means. For them, military power—including nuclear arsenals and now, particularly, their vast arsenal of ss-20s aimed at peaceful European cities—is among other things a political instrument. The Soviets do attach enormous symbolic importance to nuclear weapons in the conduct of their *diplomacy*. These weapons are a medium of exchange in the marketplace of world politics.

In the mid-1960s, when Kennan was just beginning to reexamine the merits of his containment policy, he made the point, not that he had been wrong, but that he had been misunderstood. In advocating the employment of countervailing power to resist Soviet encroachments, he had not meant, he said (in the face of his quite vivid texts), U.S. *military* power. Rather, he had

had in mind economic and other forms of assistance to states and peoples caught in the line of fire. Maybe he did have this in mind, perhaps not; but when such nonmilitary containment failed to check Communist aggression in Korea, Kennan courageously stood with those who approved the engagement of American military force in that war. But by then "deterrence" had been abandoned and "containment" had failed, since U.S. troops had been withdrawn before the Communist attack, inviting the attack.

Perhaps the flaw in the mind of this Roman patrician lies in his antecedents in the American Middle West. In this happy and most pacific realm of North America, with its regional memories of conflict chiefly those of Indian wars, many have thought of history as being tidy sequences of war and peace, with peace as the normal condition of human life. Clearly, Kennan, both as a concerned citizen and as a seasoned diplomat who has seen the 20th-century world for what it really is, cannot be accused of such innocence. But perhaps he can be accused of a perennial vice, that of imagining the world to be divided between all those unreasonable others (the "opponents") and our reasonable, humane selves, keepers of the world's conscience.

How the world learned to stop worrying and love bombing.

THE SLIDE TO TOTAL AIR WAR

BY MICHAEL SHERRY

IMAGINING THE IMPACT of the warplane before its invention, H. G. Wells saw only terrifying possibilities. Governments would grasp the bomber as an instrument of easy victory, he prophesied in 1908, and with it they would turn the cities of their enemies into "a furnace of crimson flames." But no victory would ensue. Panicked officials might try to surrender, but enraged populations would demand vengeance, and, in spasms of patriotic passion, bombing would ripple around the globe until "universal guerrilla war"—or the war of atomic bombs he foresaw in 1913—consumed mankind.

Until World War II, Wells was almost alone in seeing that aerial warfare would be, as he said in 1908, "at once enormously destructive and entirely indecisive."

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Only he sensed how bombing represented the triumph of modern warfare because it allowed national and ideological passions to be expressed in, and disguised by, the cooler logic of science. Strategic bombing during World War II—the blitz against England, the destruction of Germany, above all the incineration of Japanese cities—confirmed his prophecy.

Even now, we do not quite know what to make of air war. Unlike Wells, we see it less as man's foremost modern invention than as an inevitability of our times to which we must resign ourselves. On the 40th anniversary of the Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbor—the event which justified to Americans their resort to aerial war—and in the face of new pressures to refine our current capacities for nuclear destruction, we might ask how we came to accept bombing.

One answer is simply that, before 1914, many people believed that the more modern the weapon, the

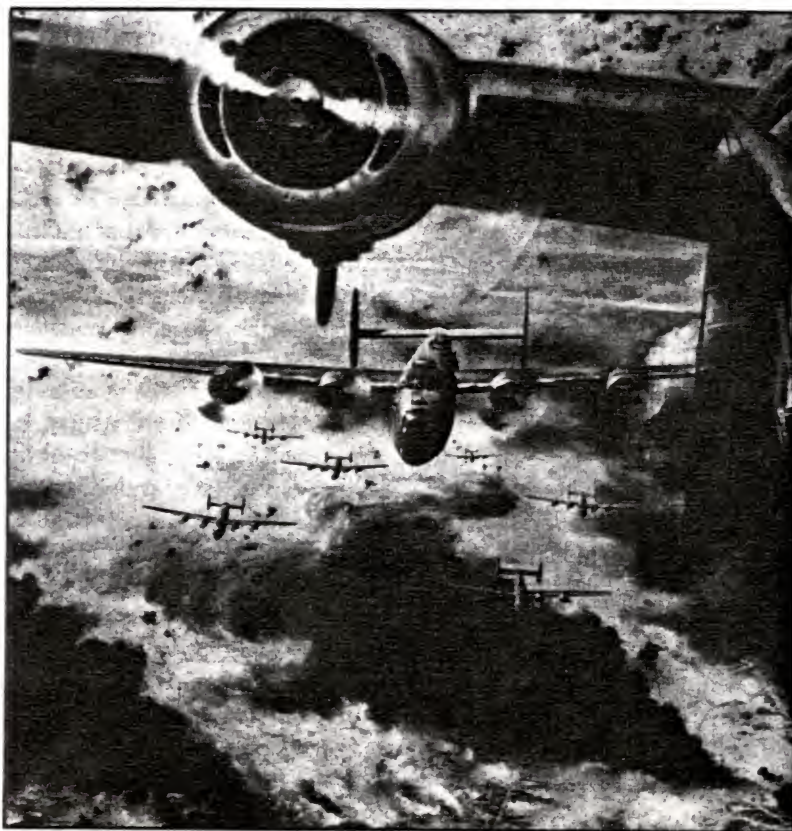
more humane it was. The accuracy and destructiveness of new devices like the machine gun made killing so efficient that nations, it was thought, could no longer sustain long wars and might shrink from them altogether. After the turn of the century, the bomber's imagined capacity to induce terror gave additional force to this comfortable faith in progress: nations would either avoid war, to avert destruction of their cities, or sue for peace quickly once the bomber struck. Until World War II, predictions about the warplane usually ran to two extremes: its many skeptics, especially numerous in the officer corps of armies and navies, downplayed it as a minor addition to the traditional ways of war; its impassioned defenders celebrated it as an instrument of humane destructiveness. Wells explored the middle ground, seeing the bomber as a horrid but limited weapon.

World War I shattered the complacent faith in the humanness of modern weapons, now seen as producing senseless carnage rather than sudden victory. But, paradoxically, the war also redoubled the need to see virtue in the warplane as the one device, still largely untested, that might yet rescue mankind from the horrors of modern war. The moral and strategic case for the bomber fused lingering hopes for the humaneness of modern weaponry with the newfound revulsion over the horrors of war. The bomber's supposed virtue was its capacity to transcend the indecisive nature of industrial war on the ground and at sea. Leapfrogging the pointless battles beneath them, the bombers would strike at the enemy's "vital centers," paralyze them, and force a mercifully quick capitulation. Billy Mitchell, the American general court-martialed for his flamboyant advocacy of air power, argued in 1925 that "the menace [of air war] will be so great that either a state will hesitate to go to war, or, having engaged in war, [bombing] will make the contest sharper, more decisive, and more quickly finished. This will result in a diminished loss of life and treasure and will thus be a distinct benefit to civilization."

The bomber enthusiasts made a gross miscalculation, though one not so different from our own continuing capacity to assume that nuclear war is its own best deterrent. Bombing, far from transcending the nature of modern war, only expressed it more grimly. It did not end the stalemate of attrition warfare, but enlarged its scope by provoking civilian populations into a deadly offensive *à outrance* against each other that mimicked what the soldiers had done on the battlefields of World War I.

Nonetheless, even those who did not share Mitchell's optimism could still exact a kind of grudging reassurance from the ghastly prospect of air raids on

civilian populations. The distinguished American liberal, Stuart Chase, for example, imagined, like so many of his contemporaries, the apocalypse of airborne gas attacks on cities. Writing in *THE NEW REPUBLIC* in 1929, he wondered about the day when the English civilization "comes, in something like half an hour, to a close. . . . Not even a rat, not even an ant, not even a roach, can survive. Every power nerve has been cut with explosives, every living thing has ceased to breathe by virtue of diphenyl chloroarsine." Yet Chase ended his essay with the hope that, should



OFFICIAL U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTOGRAPH OF 'B-24'S ON PLOESTI RAID' BY STANDLEY DERSH

such a war ever break out, the rest of the world, properly horrified, would surely "ban the machine from war," and ban war altogether.

Bombing had become a kind of doomsday fantasy, not a believable danger. Terror was its virtue, the very reason no nation would dare unleash it. Furthermore, fear masked an understandable wish: that the bomber would offer liberation from the horrors of conventional attrition warfare. Then as now, apocalyptic rhetoric, though intended to alarm and inform, more often numbed the senses and conveyed unintended reassurances.

In any event, fear never alone governed responses to the bomber. Aviation served as the source and symbol of benefits to civilization that seemed to offset its dangers. The airplane's potential for transcending natural and national boundaries led many to celebrate

it as an instrument of broadened consciousness and international harmony—the stuff of neo-Wilsonian dreams. We need only remember our own sense of space flight in the 1960s as an agent of planetary and ecological awareness to understand the mood of the 1920s and 1930s. The barriers to which men attach such significance, W. Jefferson Davis wrote in 1930, “are invisible from the skies, and the big booming air liners go shuttling over them, weaving a pattern of new understanding, banishing insularity and prejudice, building up economic interdependence—surest safeguard against war—and fusing old antipathies in the unfailing solving of daily business intercourse.” Charles Lindbergh was the “glad reuniter of long-riven parts,” in the words of a Supreme Court Justice.

The popular celebration of Lindbergh suggested another attraction of aviation. Like the combat aviators of World War I who continued to be mythologized, like Billy Mitchell in his lonely battles against a faceless military bureaucracy, Lindbergh suggested that aviation represented a last refuge of individual heroics. It was hard to dwell on the modernity of air war when the knights of the air seemed to be the antithesis of the anonymous millions who had waged modern war, and when bombers were portrayed as an economical alternative to the battleships and bloated armies that symbolized modern militarism. Alone among modern weapons—unlike the tank or the machine gun or the submarine—the airplane fulfilled peaceful fantasies and peacetime needs, often causing people to forget its grim functional purpose in war.

The airplane also symbolized technological progress, of course. But because Americans and Englishmen emphasized a theory of strategic bombing, they largely saw in military aviation the precision and elegance of modern science, not the destruction which technology made possible. The bomber, in Mitchell’s tortured distinction, would strike against “centers of production of all kinds, means of transportation, agricultural areas, ports and shipping; not so much the people themselves.” In reality, neither the state of their art nor the size of their budgets allowed airmen in the 1930s to build a bomber force capable of anything but indiscriminate attacks. Comfortable with their myth of precision bombing, they did not address the moral problem such attacks would pose.

THE POLITICS of national defense diminished still further any attention by Americans to that problem. For one thing, as the Billy Mitchell affair showed, the endless struggle of the Air Corps to gain funding and autonomy from the Army focused attention far more on bureaucratic conflict, and on secondary questions like the effectiveness of the bomber against the battleship, than on the central strategic and moral issue. The prevailing resistance to renewed involvement in Europe’s military conflicts also sharply skewed debate over air power. It seemed neither necessary nor

permissible to mention the possibility of using bombers to attack faraway nations. Insofar as that possibility arose at all, it usually was in inverted form: the common scenario about what enemy bombers might do to American cities was at most a backhanded, even unconscious, way of suggesting what we might do to the enemy. Only in imagining a war with Japan did some Americans, especially Mitchell, explicitly suggest that American bombers might attack cities.

Attention in both the media and military war games far more commonly fell on the defensive role that America’s long-range bombers should play in intercepting the battleships and carriers that might steam toward her shores. By 1939 and 1940, a curious anomaly emerged in debate over air power: defense experts and politicians inveighed against the production of short-range aircraft which, they argued, could only be used to support our armies in a return to Europe. Better, they said, to manufacture long-range B-17s—the first true strategic bomber—capable of defending the vast ocean approaches to America. In such ways, quite sensible at the time, a developing offensive capacity to bomb others remained disguised by the preoccupation with protecting ourselves.

DICTATORS’ use of aviation in the 1930s generated other twists and turns in the debate on air power. As Goering turned the Luftwaffe into a Nazi elite, as Hitler brandished his bombers at Munich, as he and Mussolini turned their warplanes against Spain, and as Japan terrorized Chinese cities from the air, air power seemed to many observers a peculiarly “fascist” technique of war. Such a perception both justified the democracies’ development of bomber forces and reassured them that they were not the ones to practice terror from the sky.

At the same time, the little information coming from “the bargain counters of murder” in China and Spain renewed, curiously enough, the foundering hopes for humane use of air power. Blood did run in the streets of Shanghai and Barcelona, but the failure there of indiscriminate slaughter to force capitulation strengthened the case for precision bombing and seemingly diminished the likelihood of future attacks on cities. Churchill pronounced terror bombing useless in a June 1939 article for *Collier’s*, a magazine which had earlier assured Americans that “wholesale bombing for sheer terrorism would be a costly, worthless gesture; it is a political catchword to scare you, but you won’t find it in the militarist’s practical handbook.”

The fatal flaw in this reasoning, as in most of the arguments about bombing, was the assumption that nations resorted to war only in rational, calculating ways, that their decisions were solely “based on the weighing of risk, or cost, against advantage,” as one defense expert put it. Lloyd George’s impassioned promise of vengeance to the victims of German bombing in World War I—“We shall bomb Germany with

compound interest!"—had already suggested, as Wells had already predicted, that bombing satisfied primal yearnings for revenge and blood, emotions barely disguised by talk of careful calibrations of tangible gain. As long as those passions were ignored, and as long as people's misconceptions about air war continued, they could not imagine how it could be waged in indecisive but horrifying ways. Unthinkable and seductive, the idea of air war against cities became acceptable with much anguish but little realistic debate.

Even the Nazis' triumph at Munich carried an attractive message. Among American officials, Hitler's success at aerial blackmail triggered not outrage but consternation and envy at how cheaply Hitler got his way. The affair completed Roosevelt's conversion to air power—as a weapon not of war and conquest, but of defense through intimidation. By the fall of 1941, squeezed between threats of war in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Roosevelt Administration sought a dramatic way to hold the Japanese at bay by staging its own Far Eastern Munich. It scrambled to build up a force of B-17s in the Philippines which would convince Tokyo that it had to cease expansion or risk incineration. Should Japanese forces march on anyway, "we'll fight mercilessly," General George Marshall, the Army's Chief of Staff, remarked in a "secret" press briefing he perhaps hoped would be leaked to the Japanese. "Flying fortresses will be dispatched immediately to set the paper cities of Japan on fire. There won't be any hesitation about bombing civilians—it will be all-out." The notion of precision bombing was already disappearing—without debate.

THE ATTACK on Pearl Harbor came before the B-17s were in place. The B-17 plan was fanciful anyway, and sober airmen knew that their bombers might soon be waging war rather than deterring it. Still, it suggested important dimensions of America's growing interest in air war. First, focusing on the deterrent capacity of air power avoided confrontation with the moral problem of its actual use in war: bloodless victory or painless defense involved no killing. Second, Americans remained determined to avoid large-scale land war, but became convinced that they had to wield power abroad. Like the British, they saw in air power a way to reap the benefits of war with minimal sacrifice of lives and democratic liberties. That appeal was doubly strong for Americans because they alone feared no retaliation for their use of the bomber, and because they abhorred the militarism and statism they associated with costly navies and conscript armies. Finally, these prewar plans suggested the force of the momentum to bomb in war. A willingness to torch Japanese cities, though strengthened by the spirit of revenge that arose after Pearl Harbor, existed well before the day of infamy.

When war broke out in Europe, the "knockout blow," long feared and long hoped for, never came.

Uncertain escalation came instead. Britain bore primary responsibility for the first attacks on cities in 1940, less out of some well-considered determination to break the morale of Germany's civilian population than out of the inability of its few, aimlessly directed bombers to do anything else. Of course strategic reasons were offered for turning British bombers loose on German cities. Britain's leaders argued that they had no other way to engage the enemy, aid Russia, and bring the war home to the German people, given the impossibility of an early invasion of the continent. Certainly Britain's substantial force of bombers could not simply be shelved until a better day came. And British morale—a strategic factor in itself—seemingly required evidence of offensive action.

NONE of these arguments was convincing, morally or strategically. British bombers did not constitute some kind of "surplus" capacity for war-making that would have been wasted unless used to fire the enemy's cities. They could have been put to excellent use against German soldiers and sailors in the life-and-death Battle of the Atlantic and the lesser contest in the Mediterranean. Or the enormous resources of manpower and materiel they consumed could have been turned to altogether different purposes. At best, bringing the war home to the German people made moral and strategic sense only if it served some useful purpose, a possibility which Britain's own performance under the Blitz alone tended to discount. Killing enemy civilians simply to sustain morale was indefensible on the face of it, and all the more so since it presumed incorrectly that morale was indeed crumbling and that there were no other ways to sustain it.

The "smokescreen of strategic bluster," as Max Hastings calls it in *Bomber Command*, and the bureaucratic euphemisms about "de-housing" German workers obscured the real sources of bombing by presuming a rational calculation of advantage that rarely took place. Britain leapt into precision attacks and then slid into terror bombing because of bureaucratic inertia and the blind urge for vengeance. The bombers were at hand, Air Marshal Arthur "Bomber" Harris and his RAF could not admit their inability to win the war, and redirection of British resources would have required officials to confess their error and the remoteness of victory. The intangible, unmeasurable objectives set for Britain's air offensive—the morale of its own citizens and of its enemies—further ensnared the country in bombing. "Admirals could be sacked for failing to sink or save ships, generals for failing to win or hold ground," Hastings has written. "But nowhere was it suggested in the winter of 1941-42 that if Germany failed to collapse by a given date in the face of air attack, then the bomber offensive would have to be judged a failure."

The vagueness of the objectives in turn indicated how much vengeance alone motivated the bombing, as

Churchill suggested in his talk of a "devastating, exterminating attack" on German cities. The closing 18 months of the war decisively confirmed the blindness of the urge to bomb. Even as doubts about the morality of area bombing persisted among many Englishmen, even as the British at last developed a more accurate bombing capability, even as some airmen and scientists argued cogently for the superior benefits of an attack on enemy oil and transportation, the city-bombing offensive—aided at times by American air forces—escalated. Its targets were often casually chosen simply because they were destructible rather than important. In cities like Darmstadt and Dresden, the firestorms raged.

Measured against Nazi crimes and inevitable wartime passions, little of this may surprise us now. Nor are bombers the only weapons to be hurled into senseless battles: armies march on stupid campaigns, battle-ships steam to pointless engagements. The record of bombing in Europe neither proved nor disproved the utility of strategic airpower. The bomber offensive against Germany could not alone win the war, but it was useful in paving the way for final victory on the ground by destroying the Luftwaffe, scrambling Nazi logistics, perhaps even by justifying the delay until 1944 of an invasion of France that might have been disastrous in 1942 or 1943, the target dates of many American planners.

But what we know about the emotions that informed the Allied bombing campaign suggests that the usual questions we ask—Was precision bombing more effective than area bombing? Was tactical bombing more useful than strategic?—simply miss the point. We need to understand not why they failed to choose this or that alternative, but why they largely failed to weigh alternatives at all. Deeper forces than strategic calculation fueled the momentum to bomb.

THIS WAS evident in the American air war against Japan as well. Circumstances differed. Americans never experienced the suffering in their cities, which makes us more tolerant of the British urge for revenge. Likewise, Japan, unlike Germany, never threatened the survival of the Allies. On the other hand, Japan's very inability to retaliate enhanced the attractions of bombing it, and the alternative paths to victory seemed either too costly (in the case of invasion) or too tedious and uncertain (in the case of naval blockade and economic strangulation) for a nation committed to a bigger task in Europe and impatient for the return of peace.

But in the Pacific War as well, strategic calculations rationalized policy more than they dictated it. Even before Pearl Harbor, the "paper cities" of Japan had seemed inviting targets for wholesale firebombing. When the precision raids begun in 1944 proved costly and only marginally effective, the head of the Army Air Forces, General Henry Harley Arnold, keenly

aware that the bomber's success would determine the fate of the AAF, sacked the commander committed to precision bombing. In January 1945, Curtis LeMay—later to gain fame for his advocacy of bombing North Vietnam "back to the stone age"—took over the job.

Without direct orders from Roosevelt or Arnold, but under intense pressure from both to get results, LeMay decided to launch massive night incendiary raids on Japanese cities. On March 9, 1945, over 300 of his B-29s destroyed 16 square miles of Tokyo. It was the most destructive air raid of the war. As the superheated air generated fierce windstorms and consumed the oxygen, tens of thousands of Japanese collapsed "like so many fish left gasping in the bottom of a lake that has been drained," as one survivor put it. The death toll probably exceeded that at Hamburg, or Dresden, or even Hiroshima and Nagasaki. LeMay's bombers moved on to the other Japanese cities through the spring and summer, omitting only a few to serve as "virgin" targets for the atomic bomb.

HOW WOULD the firebombing contribute to victory? No one said, beyond vaguely arguing that since the bombers couldn't hit the factories, they could slow production by destroying the city around them. Firebombing seemed cost-effective since it "causes a greater loss of man-hours per ton of bombs dropped than can be accomplished by any other means." But the connection between destruction and surrender was simply asserted, or often just taken for granted. Indeed, in response to a question in June 1945 from Arnold about when the war would end, LeMay confessed that he hadn't thought about it, and later replied that it would have to end by October 1 because by then his bombers would have run out of targets!

Back home the American press calmly accepted the destruction as deserved vengeance for Japanese war crimes or as grim preparation for Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands. Kamikaze attacks on American naval forces allowed the Japanese to appear, more than ever, an irrational foe in American eyes. They strengthened racial stereotypes already acted on in the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in 1942. This image of an enemy willing to commit national suicide both justified and obscured American fanaticism.

The two nations differed only in that the Japanese could be fanatical in the expenditure of manpower, the Americans in the application of almost limitless firepower. Because American fanaticism was technological, it was expressed in and hidden by the dehumanized language of science and systems analysis—bureaucratic doubletalk again about "de-housing workers," for example. Bombing, as scientist Freeman Dyson has written, "made evil anonymous. Through science and technology, evil is organized bureaucratically so that no individual below the very top is responsible for what happens." Indeed, in the American case, where the decision-making process was so complex, the chain

of command so long, the distance from the war so great, it is not clear how much even those at "the very top" assumed responsibility.

Unlike the bombing of Germany, the attack on Japan did have the final justification of an apparently decisive contribution to victory. Yet even here judgments are necessarily tentative. Much of the firebombing simply destroyed industrial and military capacity already rendered useless by a naval and air blockade that served Japan's access to raw materials. Bombing also shattered popular confidence in the possibility of victory, but it produced no clamor for surrender, and no one has ever argued that the government, already resigned to defeat at the start of the fire raids, surrendered in response to popular pressures.

The best case for bombing is that it gave the peace faction additional leverage in forcing an acceptance of surrender, hurrying it along by some unknowable margin of time. That is, the bombing did not hasten defeat—already inflicted—but surrender. But the sticking point to surrender had long been Japanese uncertainty about Soviet intentions and about the Allies' plans for the Emperor. It is by no means clear whether Russia's entry into the war and Washington's guarded, last-minute assurances about a continuing role for the Emperor weren't the critical variables, rather than the firebombing and the attack on Hiroshima.

During the cold war, revisionist historians helped to stir a rancorous debate about American intentions in dropping the atomic bomb. Much outrage arose over the failure to issue assurances about the Emperor before Hiroshima and the possible use of atom bombs as an instrument of cold war diplomacy. Informative about the grave issues of the postwar period, much of the debate nonetheless missed the point. We would have used the bomb even had no cold war been brewing.

INDEED, the firebombing of Germany and Japan, especially the Tokyo holocaust, had already created a momentum that preempted strategic and moral anxiety about use of the atomic bomb. No new decision was necessary, only an unwillingness to revoke old ones. We should be shocked not by the possibility that we used the weapon to some hard-boiled purpose—such as threatening Russia—but by the possibility that we used it to no well-defined purpose at all, simply because we had it, because we assumed that we must use everything we had, and because we assumed that using everything would, somehow, lead to victory. In choosing, as the United States largely has, to remember and agonize over only the "decision" to use the atomic bombs, we comfort ourselves by simplifying our evil, narrowing it to one moment of choice rather than seeing a pattern that lasted an entire war.

Because of the wholesale slaughter practiced—and more than that, the racism and dehumanization that characterized it—we may even find in the ovens of

Tokyo a moral equivalence of Hitler's gas chambers. Two simple, perhaps distasteful, but powerful distinctions make us cautious about any such facile comparison. Racial hatred was endemic to the attitudes that led us into the Pacific War, to the culture of America at war, to the motivation for killing—to the way we waged war. But it was never central to our purpose in war, as it was to Germany's. Once we were victorious, we ceased killing Japanese. We can be sure that victorious Nazis would not have ceased killing Jews—indeed, at the end they kept it up even to the point of sacrificing their war effort. For the American forces, killing was sometimes an end in itself, but not exclusively. It was connected in American minds to victory, however casually they measured it, however often they forgot it.

A second distinction is also necessary. Surely the German and Japanese leaders who sacrificed their populations to enemy bombers—and more important, did so in what they knew, by the time of Dresden or Tokyo, to be an utterly futile cause—share a measure of blame for massive civilian casualties. The Japanese and German governments had an alternative to the killing: surrender. The victims of the Holocaust had no alternative at all.

THE SIN in Allied bombing was above all its inadvertence. It was technological fanaticism—a pursuit of destructive ends, but one expressed, sanctioned, and disguised by technological means. It occurred because of the growth in modern times of two distinct but related phenomena—the will to destroy, and the means of destruction. The will to destroy helped motivate development of the means; attainment of the means made the destruction seem imperative and painless. Employment of the means in war enraged nations into waging more destruction. The sin was inadvertent in that illusions about modern technology made air war unthinkable before it occurred, and bureaucratic war-making made responsibility for it diffuse and unclear once war began. It was sin of a modern kind because it seemed to involve no choice. It was the product of a slow accretion of large fears, thoughtless assumptions, and at best discrete decisions.

We might remember this now when we entertain the fantasy that there will be a moment of supreme decision at the brink of some future world war when our leaders, their fingers dangling above the nuclear button, ponder what to do. As Wells knew, we set our course by the ways in which we think—or decline to think—about war in the weeks and months and years prior to the moment of supreme crisis, and by the little decisions we make in preparation for it. Harold Macmillan once recalled how "we thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear war today." The parallel should not comfort us. Just as one generation learned to accept bombing as the terror that could not happen, so too has this generation accepted the bomb itself.